

Battle of Australia Day Commemoration - Sydney
07 Sep 16
Commander Rebecca Jeffcoat, RAN

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

First I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, the Traditional Custodians of this Land on which we are gathered, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I am honoured to be invited to address you on this national day of remembrance. It is a privilege to be able to remember with you today, the events of 1942 and early 1943; the period of time when Australians and our allies fought to defeat Japan's plan to force Australia's surrender.

November and December of 1941 were dark months for Australia.

HMAS *Sydney*, and all 645 crew, was lost to the German raider *Kormoran*. In the Far East the British capital ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* were sunk. Hong Kong fell on Christmas day 1941.

Malaya was invaded in December and, despite a fighting withdrawal, by 15 February 1942 Singapore was surrendered. This resulted in the imprisonment of 100,000 British, Indian and Australian troops.

This series of catastrophic events led to the Australian Prime Minister, John Curtin declaring on 16th February 1942:

“The fall of Singapore can only be described as Australia's Dunkirk... The Fall of Dunkirk initiated the Battle for Britain. The fall of Singapore opens the Battle for Australia.”

He foresaw the impending massive struggle to defend Australia against Japanese military aggression; that in the weeks and months

and years ahead this 'Battle for Australia' would be fought over land and at sea – challenging Australia's territorial integrity.

Today I would like to tell the story of Australia's Corvettes; their service goes hand in hand with the Battle for Australia. It is a story of courage over adversity, of Australian ingenuity, and of the incredible efforts of the home front to build 60 Australian designed ships in dockyards around the country.

When war looked imminent in 1938, the Royal Australian Navy realised it urgently needed a fleet of escort ships to guard convoys and keep the sea lanes open. The result was a ship designed by Australians who had never designed warships before, built by Australians who had never built ships before and manned by Australians most of whom had never been to sea before.

The keel of the first was laid down in February 1940. She was launched in August and commissioned in December as HMAS Bathurst. Corvettes were soon sliding down the slipways of eight shipyards and being commissioned at the rate of one every 26 days. They served in every theatre of the war, they escorted convoys, sank submarines, shot at - and sometimes shot down - planes, swept mines, ferried troops, bombarded enemy shore guns, surveyed uncharted waters, towed damaged ships to safety, and even landed spies. They steamed a total of 11 million kilometres, nearly all of it in dangerous waters, and often behind enemy lines.

In 1942, seven corvettes fought in the Malayan campaign in the waters around Singapore. They were the last Allied ships to leave Singapore when it fell, then the last to leave Java when it, too, fell.

At the same time, others were tackling the Japanese across northern Australia. HMAS Deloraine, which had been commissioned only eight weeks earlier, took on a Japanese submarine, the I-124, 80 kilometres west of Darwin and sank it. Only a few short days later, on 19 Feb, she was in Darwin harbour when Japanese aircraft attacked.

By mid 1942, there were 24 corvettes convoying merchant ships around the Australian coast where Japanese submarines were operating. Two corvettes, Geelong and Whyalla, were in harbour the night war came to Sydney, when three Japanese mini submarines entered harbour, attacked with their torpedoes, and sunk the depot ship Kuttabul (my ship's namesake).

At the end of 1942 into early 1943, Corvettes escorted the convoys bringing vast quantities of military stores and equipment to the front line troops fighting in New Guinea through the Owen Stanley ranges and on the northern coast.

Through all of their extensive service, two corvettes were lost in collisions at sea, one was sunk by a mine, and only one, HMAS Armidale, was sunk by enemy action.

She went down on 1 December, 1942, off Timor, while taking supplies and reinforcements to the commandos fighting ashore. Under attack by enemy torpedo-bombers and fighters, Armidale was hit by two torpedoes as a near-miss bomb blew a hole in her side. The Captain, LCDR David Richards, gave the order to abandon ship, but one man stayed - Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean. He struggled back to the after gun, strapped himself in and fired at the planes which were strafing his shipmates in the water. He poured a stream of shells at the planes and sent one cartwheeling into the sea. Despite wounds from enemy fire he continued firing as he disappeared beneath the waves.

Ten crew and 37 soldiers had been killed in the action. 102 men were in the water. Of those, 52 left on two separate missions to seek help in the ship's motor-boat and their patched up whaler, they were eventually rescued by the corvette *Kalgoorlie*, 4 and 9 days later respectively.

The men left behind on the rafts, were sighted by a RAAF Catalina flying boat 8 days after the sinking, however it could not land as the sea was too rough. Food and water was dropped, but despite subsequent searches they were never seen again.

HMAS Sheean, a Collins class submarine, and the first of the new patrol boats, HMAS Armidale, were named in recognition of the courage and ingenuity that characterised the Australian corvettes in the Battle for Australia.

Although focusing on the service of the Corvettes, I cannot finish today without recalling the events of this period which rightly hold a place of honour within the Australian Psyche. Those key actions that eventually turned the tide on Japan's plans; we remember:

- the Battles of the Coral Sea, the Java Sea, of Sunda Strait, of Milne Bay and of the Bismark Sea,
 - the actions in New Guinea in the Kokoda Campaign and the beach heads at Gona, Buna and San-an-anda, and
 - the Guadalcanal Campaign.
-

In 1943 Japan's unconditional surrender was still far off - but the certainty that victory would come had replaced the deep fears of early 1942. John Curtin's worst concerns after Singapore fell had not been realized. Japan had been first checked and then defeated, by land, sea and air, north of Australia.

What do we owe to this heroic generation of young Australians, and our allies, who died defending this country in 1942 and who are now passing into history?

We honour the courage and tenacity of those who died fighting in the jungles of New Guinea.

We remember with gratitude the loyalty and skill of the Papuan men who played a vital role in supporting the troops, especially the sick and wounded.

We remember those in the ships sunk off our shores and the faithful sailors who stuck to their guns and died fighting; like Teddy Sheean.

We remember the brave airman who fought in the skies of the Pacific.

We remember the lonely Coastwatchers across the South West Pacific who kept up a vigil for months and years and tapped out their vital warnings of Japanese activity.

We remember the allied Merchant Navies; who “*brought the troops their lifeblood, and paid for it with their own*”.

And, we remember and honour the women and men who made their contribution on the home front, remaining strong and steadfast, despite hardship, the loss of life, and the threat of invasion.

We owe them all our remembrance and gratitude on this day and every day.

Their legacy to us is our life long liberty, prosperity and peace.

Today’s Last Post bugle sounds for them all.

Lest we forget